


UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



FOUNDED 1836

WASHINGTON, D.C.

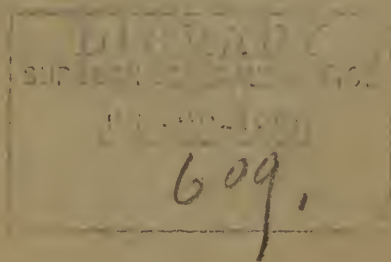



DR. STRONG'S

Funeral Sermon,

ON THE DEATH OF

DR. JOSHUA LATHROP.



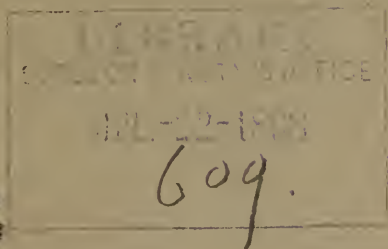
A
SERMON,
DELIVERED AT THE FUNERAL
OF

DR. JOSHUA LATHROP,

WHO DIED OCTOBER 29, 1807.

AGED 84.

BY JOSEPH STRONG, D. D.
PASTOR OF THE FIRST CHURCH IN NORWICH.



HARTFORD:
PRINTED BY LINCOLN AND GLEASON.
1808.

FUNERAL SERMON.

II. CORINTHIANS V. 4.

*Not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon,
that mortality might be swallowed up of life.*

THESE words present to our view, a severe struggle between nature and grace. They place before us a good man, reluctant to encounter life's last scenes; and at the same time enraptured by the high destinies, which await the godly in the other world. It might have been a recollection of those pains only which often mark the dying hour, that operated thus powerfully upon the apostle's mind; though by no means is it certain that such was the fact. There are other considerations which add inconceivably to the unwelcome aspect of death, beside the pains with which it is attended. It can hardly be imagined that a man, of such constitutional firmness of mind as St. Paul, and who had already endured "deaths oft" in his Master's cause, would deprecate death in such strong terms and shrink away from its pains however excruciating. Might it not be that his unwelcome anticipa-

tion with respect to death, arose in part from its connection with the present life, to which all are attached and which few relinquish without a sigh. Under an impression that such a conjecture is well founded, the two following inquiries naturally arise to view and claim our attention, through the remaining part of the present season for worship;—the circumstances which conspire to render being unclothed of the body so disagreeable and those considerations of far superior weight, which reconcile to the event.

The wisdom and goodness of God are manifested to no small degree, in so organizing man, that he shall answer, in the best manner the purposes of his being and particular location. Made to tarry for a space on earth, certain propensities are now absolutely essential, which in another state would be useless and perhaps disadvantageous. No propensity could be wholly changed, or desire eradicated from the heart, without leaving the probationer for eternity in a degree disqualified to answer the interesting designs of his creation. It cannot be expected, nor is it to be wished, that the native structure even of the believer's mind should be materially varied. He will not cease to be one "of like passions" till he has actually arrived in heaven. Provided these reasonings are correct, they cannot fail to throw much light upon the leading branch of our subject. They give their decided sanction to the following remarks.

There is implanted in every breast a constitutional love of life. Such is the import of Solomon's words, "the light is sweet and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun." Nor does this remark by any

means stand confined to the human race. We may discover throughout the whole of animated nature, a constant effort for self-preservation. The reptile exerts its feeble powers to avoid the foot by which it is likely to be crushed ; the bird shuns the fowler's snare ; the ox struggles hard to escape the knife ; nor is man less a self-preserver, except when bereft of reason, blinded by passion, or infatuated by infidelity. The examples are not rare, where misfortune, in its most oppressed forms, is preferred to death. Let me live and not die, is the indication of every look and the subject of the most fervent prayer. The alternative presented to the choice, is immediate death, or a remnant of days as miserable as they are hopeless ; the latter commands every feeling of preference and is afterwards a matter of warm self congratulation.

And in addition to such a constitutional propensity ; attachment to life is oftentimes much strengthened from a prolonged habit of feeling. It strengthens as cares increase, as wealth accumulates, as family connections multiply, and as general information advances. "The eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear with hearing." This principle assists to account for the attachment of old people to life, beyond what was visible when they were young. The tree has been extending itself for a long course of years. In proportion to the length of its branches, is the depth of its roots, so that to force them up requires increased exertion and is a source of additional pain. The youth lives in himself, but it is true of the aged person that he lives in his children and other descendants. As the ties of blood or affinity extend, love proportionably increases, and it is a propo-

sition too self-evident to require formal proof, that love thus particularly directed must have a powerful influence to increase the love of life generally. Life and its enjoyments, though separable in idea, are not so in practice. They insensibly entwine themselves, so as to form out one common whole.

It may also assist to explain why it is so disagreeable to be unclothed, that the nature and effects of death, as they respect the body, are none of them pleasing.—Though as was observed in the introduction to the discourse, this thought did not exclusively dictate the apostle's feelings, yet it will not be urged that it had no effect upon them. To die supposes a painful scene. Its outlines are often marked with agony and distortion. It is the harbinger of oblivion, writes vanity on all that is earthly, and lowers down that curtain which shuts out from the sight of friends and neighbours, from opportunities for social and religious intercourse, from the congregation of God's people. Words cannot be more forcible with respect to this last mentioned thought than those of Hezekiah, when he had been sick. "In the cutting off of my days, I shall go to the gates of the grave : I am deprived of the residue of my years. I shall not see the Lord, even the Lord in the land of the living. I shall behold man no more with the inhabitants of the world. The grave cannot praise thee ; death cannot celebrate thee ; they that go down into the pit cannot hope for thy truth. The living, the living, he shall praise thee, as I do this day ; the father to the children shall make known thy truth."

The whole, which has been already said, commands the sanction of universal feeling. It is the language of nature. Unclothed, every personal interest is laid prostrate. The mansion now occupied is that where "there is no wisdom, knowledge, nor device." But it is not barely feeling which addresses us upon the present subject. Reason, seconded by revelation, also presents the good man with an argument against being unclothed. No farther opportunity is furnished him, to be useful in his day and generation. We may be more certain that this thought rested with weight upon the apostle's mind, when we recur to his language upon a different occasion. "I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ which is far better. Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you."

Every thing which partakes of selfishness, here gives place to benevolence ; personal enjoyment to the extension of happiness. What more noble motive can there be to wish for prolonged exemption from the grave, than to have it still in one's power to feed the hungry and to clothe the naked, comfort the widow and the fatherless, lift up the hands which hang down and strengthen the feeble knees, admonish those who do wickedly, arrest sin in its progress, direct the inquiring mind, aid the progress of grace, and lead in "the way everlasting." When the great crisis of nature can be no longer avoided, those who have felt and conducted thus, will have abundant cause to adopt the language of the devout Simeon and say "Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word : not only have our eyes seen thy salvation, which thou

hast prepared before the face of all people," but thou hast made us the humble instruments of doing good and saving others. These are the principal grounds of a preference, to continue clothed "with the earthly house of this tabernacle." They operate more or less upon all, and are innocent or criminal according to the extent in which they are indulged. Appointed for good purposes, it is unhappy indeed if we make them subservient to those which are bad.

But being for these and other reasons, fond of a prolonged pilgrimage on this side of the grave, does not prevent there being reasons of a superior and more pressing character, which urge a speedy departure.—The text more than implies, it asserts it to be fact. "Not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon."

It was proposed for the second article of discourse, to investigate the grounds of the asserted preference. Indeed to say that every ground of preference for death is correct, would be absurd if not impious. It would be an affront to reason, an abuse of morals, and a profanation of the sacred oracles. How many have been known to express their preference for death, from the influence of feelings altogether selfish! What made their minds preponderate to such a choice, was that they might be freed from present pain or avoid future suffering. They incautiously indulged a wish which augured the worst with respect to their future well-being. The pains of an hour so absorbed their thoughts, that they were wholly unmindful of those pains which shall never have an end. They forgot to practise in conformity to the good resolution of Job,

“all the days of mine appointed time will I wait, till my change come.”

But though thus forbidden, to covet a discharge from the pains of earth because hard to endure ; there are grounds which give entire consistency to the wish. Was freedom from the exercise of depraved disposition the wished for object, the inference would then be as favourable as it was in the other case unfavourable and to be deprecated. Nothing short of heaven will do away the indwellings of sin. The person sanctified of God, is in the habit of considering himself in an enemy's land. So far is he from “rolling sin as a sweet morsel under his tongue,” that he makes that excellent prayer of the Psalmist daily his own : “Search me, O God, and know my heart, try me and know my thoughts, and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” He says with no small emotion, “woe is me ! for I am undone, because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips ; for mine eyes have seen the king, the Lord of hosts.” He exclaims, “how long shall I remain a dweller in this land of deserts and pits, of drought and the shadow of death.” I wait for nothing but the divine command to throw off this my perishable clothing. O that I might arise and be gone, in full assurance never to revisit this place, “where the pit and fear and sorrow are on every side.”

But it will not do justice to the present argument, to dwell only upon the believer's future exemption from sin and misery. Heaven is more than a negative state. Its freedom from evil both natural and moral, by no means measures its blessedness. Hence the conclu-

ding clause of the text: " But clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life." What is there great or enobling, delightful or improving, which being thus clothed upon does not imply ? It implies that when the believer arrives at his better home, he shall be covered " with light, holiness, and joy." It bespeaks the vision of God, copious draughts from the river of pleasure, and the unceasing duration of every conceivable enjoyment. Let the words of the apostle John, here serve for a comment upon those of the apostle Paul. Let us hear the former express, in different language, exactly the same sentiment as that now under review. " For to him that overcometh will I grant to set with me on my throne, even as I also overcame and am set down with my father on his throne. And I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out ; and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and I will write upon him my new name."

After the comparative view which has been now taken of the motives to remain clothed with the earthly house of this tabernacle, and to be so clothed upon, that mortality may be swallowed up of life ; how unreasonable does it appear that the influence of the former upon the practice is so great, and of the latter so small. As a general matter, the solitude of mankind is widely extended with respect to the life that now is, whereas for that which is to come, it is more than equally limited in its operation. But few entertain that realizing and operative sense of eternal things which they ought. They leave futurity out of sight, or at most think of

its high concerns with so much indifference, that they defer securing an interest in them to be the work of some future day ;—perhaps of a day which shall be preceded by that of death. If not before, when death arrives we shall see the two worlds in the light of each other, without deception or partiality. Nothing can be therefore more desirable, than now to appreciate each of them according to its real importance. This would be to use the world as not abusing it, and assist to prepare the way for a particular and unqualified application of what the angel declared from heaven to St. John : “ Blessed are they that are called ‘unto the marriage supper of the Lamb ; blessed are they that do his commandments ; blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth ; yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labours, and their works do follow them.”

We may wish and pray not to be unclothed, but neither shall our wishes nor prayers prevail. The decree has gone forth from God and it shall not return to him void, “ dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return.” In the warfare of death there is no discharge, “ for as dieth the fool so dieth the wise man.” Godliness may obviate the bitter effects of death, but it cannot prevent its stroke. Our recent return from the repositories of the dead supersedes the need of all other proof in the case. We there committed to the dust the remains of one, universally respected both for his amiableness and goodness. Unambitious to shine in the higher walks of life, and not at all elated by the pride of wealth ; our departed father and friend pursued that humble course and practised those accommodating

manners, that did not fail to conciliate an unusual share of esteem and love. His enemies, if he had them, were silenced into respect by his virtues; and his friends were numerous and sincere. It is not the calculation of a fond partiality or the language of flattery, that he was, "an Israelite indeed." It was during his collegiate life, that, in the judgment of charity, he commenced that race of godliness, in which he stedfastly persevered. The term allowed him in his Master's service was unusually long, nor did he spend any part of it in idleness. Though he was in his eighty fifth year, he by no means outlived himself. Neither debility of body or mind, prevented his bringing forth much fruit, even at that very advanced period. During a number of his last years, visits, dictated by friendship, constituted one of his chief employments; and it was noticeable, that of his visits, the indigent and unfortunate commanded a large share. We may presume the remark of St. James was often in his mind, and certainly it was written upon his life; "pure religion and undefiled before God and the father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction." There are none but what must feel the death of Dr. Lathrop. Though he had lived many years, it was not long enough to satisfy the wishes either of his friends or of the unfortunate. By his death, our church has experienced a great loss; society is deeply interested in the removal of so deserving a member; his neighbours will find that they have no small cause to weep over him; and his consort and children, that their loss is irreparable. We can address arguments of comfort to them, but it must be left to time and those consolations of God, which are neither few nor small, to effect

the entire healing of their wounds. It surely becomes them not to murmur. Under the pressure of grief, they will not forget how mercy is intermixed with judgment. They will bear in mind the goodness of God, in continuing the husband and father to them so long. They will reflect with much satisfaction, that he led a respectable and useful life, that he died like a Christian, and that charity pronounces he is now so "clothed upon, that mortality is swallowed up of life." When in God's own good and appointed time, we shall respectively be unclothed of this flesh, may we be thus clothed upon and made blessed for ever. AMEN.

